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*Does Religion Cause Violence? Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Religion in the Modern World* edited by Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming, Joel Hodge, and Carly Osborn (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), xii + 259 pp.

The question, 'Does religion cause violence?', usually produces staggeringly unhelpful responses, defaulting to a level of debate found in sensationalist journalism and debased among the New Atheists that leaves everyone less informed and more frustrated. By contrast, the volume *Does Religion Cause Violence? Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Violence and Religion in the Modern World*, encourages readers to see this blunt question anew through closely engaging with the work of René Girard, one of the world's most renowned scholars of religion and violence in the twentieth century and esteemed historian, literary critic and philosophical anthropologist. The challenge set out in the volume is to bring together 'the insights of René Girard…with the most recent scholarship on religion, culture, and violence' (3). The editors acknowledge that Girard has a 'sophisticated apparatus for understanding violence' (3), and when considering that recent scholarship on religion and violence is vast, the project seems ambitious. However, the essays in the volume offer something that is often lacking in scholarship in the area: a sustained interrogation of the question of religion and violence anchored in a theoretically rich thinker. This provides the volume with opportunities for depth and critical examination not found elsewhere. The volume is the product of an international and interdisciplinary conference held as part of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. At its best, the volume reads less as published conference proceedings, which can bring a haphazard arrangement and variable quality, and more as part of an ongoing dialogue among scholars

steeped in the thought of Girard and their combined earnest efforts to delve deeper into the implications of his thought for modern terrorism and violence.

The focus on Girard means that readers unfamiliar with his corpus of works and ideas will benefit from reading the appendix, 'René Girard at a Glance', and consulting the glossary of 'key Girardian terms'. Girard's thought on violence developed over his career, but his theory of violence is ultimately a social psychological account of the roots of human behaviour grounded in desire and competition that is used to explain the origins and function of religion. His theory acknowledges that humans have evolved a capacity for desire and that this desire is imitative or mimetic in quality. Whether or not we are aware of it, we desire because we imitate the desires of others. This theory of mimesis, or what Girard calls 'mimetic desire', contributes to envy and rivalry between individuals and groups. On a social level, mimetic rivalries accumulate and threaten social breakdown, and when a breakdown is imminent these rivalries are transferred onto an individual or group arbitrarily chosen by the social whole as a scapegoat. Girard postulated that archaic cultures managed their own violence by discharging it upon a scapegoat, and by victimization, transferring desires and mimetic rivalries onto the 'sacred'. The sacred thus means something quite specific to Girard as it arises from the mob divinizing the victim. The sacred is 'the violence of men, expelled, exteriorized, hypostatized', and violence is transcended into stable institutions and the components of religion: rituals, myths and prohibitions. The stability brought about by religion serves to keep the lid on the destructive possibilities of mimetic desire through recapitulating and re-enacting ritual sacrifice and recounting mythic justifications and safeguarding against the worst of mimetic rivalry by means of regulations and taboos. So, as Cavanaugh notes, Girard uses the term 'religion' not in the sense of unified religious worldviews—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, etc—but as 'the myths and practises by

which violence is legitimated and controlled in any social order'. What does this accomplish for our understanding of the relationship between religion and violence? Religion emerges from the violent propensity of humankind but cannot be said to be a 'cause' of violence because religion is enwrapped in culture and human desire (more on this below).

The themes raised in Girard's work have immense purchase for thinking about religion and violence, as the essays comprising this volume explore. The volume is organized in three parts: the first is conceptual, the second examines contemporary instances of violence and efforts at deterrence, and the third explores 'Islamic terrorism' as a 'case study'. The structure within each section is less clear, as four papers are responses to other papers in the volume rather than to Girard's work directly, but three chapters, by Cavanaugh, Dupuy, and Afsaruddin, serve as anchor points for each section. Respectively and in broad terms, these chapters ask: What does interrogation of the categories of religion and myth bring to our understanding of religious and secular violence? How does violence and the sacred function today? And how well does Girard's 'sophisticated apparatus' translate to understanding Islamic terrorism of late?

Cavanaugh's chapter attempts to bring Girard's thinking about religion and violence into conversation with his own well-known and trenchant work on *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. The chapter provides an excellent summary of his argument therein that states: the myth of religious violence holds that religion has more of a tendency to promote violence than secular phenomena, and this myth is propagated by pervasive assumptions about religion as a transhistorical and transcultural essence separate from other spheres like politics and economics. In his chapter, Cavanaugh interrogates Girard's use of the term 'religion' and 'myth' and asks how Girard can aid in our thinking about the category of religion in relation to violence. He suggests that Girard's use of the term religion does not deploy

it as a universal category but instead sees religion is intertwined with culture and human desire. Myth is an idea found in Girard in his understanding of scapegoating – an idea that the scapegoat serves as a myth that hides the real cause of violence in the act of scapegoating, that is, of mimetic desire and rivalry. So while Cavanaugh's work was developed independently of Girard, they share similarities in style and theme, even if one needs to be mindful that both authors are engaged in different types of projects and use concepts that need translating. Cavanaugh's opening chapter underscores both the challenges but also the rewards of bringing Girard into conversation with other perspectives on religion and violence, and it encourages a distinct and complex view into the category of religion.

Anchoring the second section of the volume is Dupuy's chapter, wonderfully entitled *The Sacred is Back—But as Simulacrum*, that explores how 'sacred terror' is a copy of a copy, that is, a Simulacrum. His argument expounds upon Girard's work on religion and violence in modernity and the idea that in archaic religion the sacred is a copy of the violence bestowed upon a scapegoat. In modernity, the capacity of the exteriorization of violence through the sacred, and the social order that the sacred once brought through religion, is worn down and functions in a 'low-gear mimetic crisis' (97). This crisis is explored further in the chapter by Goodhart but it is made vivid in Dupuy's exploration of the difference between sacrifice (collective victimage) and murder. Where religion once brought social order to hedge violence through sacrifice, terrorist violence, of the type of the November 2015 Paris shootings, is decoupled from the mechanisms of the sacred that subverted violence and turns into murder, a simulacrum of the sacred. In a different application of Girard, Dupuy explores the example of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear deterrence is a new guise for the sacred in a Girardian sense as these policies served to transform the self-destructive possibility of humanity into a means of

containment, though its logic is an 'ethical abomination': 'nuclear deterrence is a return to the sacred, but in a rational way this time' (104).

The third section, exploring 'Islamic terrorism' as a case study, is where cracks in the Girardian perspective emerge. It opens up two questions over how much influence Girard's work can have: How applicable is Girard's work to the study of Islam; and, what does Girard offer to fields like terrorism and security studies, where so much effort has now gravitated to understand the causes 'Islamic' violence through the scientific category of radicalisation?

Afsaruddin's chapter engages closely and critically with Girard's view of Islam. She argues that for Girard, Christianity and the cross signifies the pinnacle of inverting archaic religion's scapegoating tendency by radically revealing the innocent victim of Christ. According to Girard, the Judeo-Christian tradition offers a means to circumvent the victim-making scapegoating engine of all cultures as the Christian biblical story reaches a climax in the story of Jesus whose innocence is championed and through whom the scapegoating mechanism is revealed narratively. Girard's remarks about Islam in *Battling to the End* suggest, by contrast, a regression to archaic religion that is violent to its core: the figurehead of the "innocent victim" in Christianity is contrasted with the figurehead in Islam as a "warrior". Afsaruddin argues astutely that Girard's conception of Islam is not based on an historical understanding of Islam but 'draws instead from popular and ahistorical perceptions of Islam and Muslims' (162). She suggests that in contrast to Christianity, Islam does not have the concept of scapegoating (or original sin) as each human being is accountable for his or her own actions. Instead, Islam stresses justice, and 'Islam puts an end to mimetic violence…through its emphasis on justice and on individual accountability for one's actions, thereby erasing any notion of collective guilt, and severely straitjacketing violence so that it becomes well-nigh impossible except under very limited

conditions' (163). Are other mechanisms of curtailing violence ignored by Girard's emphasis on scapegoating and the Christian tradition? Afsaruddin argues so. Cavanaugh too says that he is 'uneasy' with Girard's approach to Islam that is 'easily assimilated to the kind of West vs. Islam binary that contributes to escalation' in conflict (21), leaving us to wonder how suitable Girard's analysis is for studying Islam in relation to violence.

Another limitation revealed in Girard's work relates to how far his work can stretch across disciplinary boundaries, particularly in security and terrorism studies and the study of radicalization. This is not so much a limitation of Girard but reflects a possible incompatibility of paradigms of analysis. Droogan and Waldek illustrate this possible incompatibility in bringing their expertise in security and terrorism studies. They want to avoid labelling 'acts, groups and motivations as "religious"' (174) while acknowledging that faith groups can play 'active and vocal roles' in countering violent extremism. Girard is given a nod in passing, relating to the factor of moral outrage over the victimized (180). Girard's dense thought is distilled into part of a wide matrix of causal factors in social-psychological frameworks and models of radicalization and deradicalisation (socio-economic, ideological, psychological etc.), losing its substance. It loses what Palaver in his chapter calls a 'more substantial understanding of religion' (200). As I suggested earlier in summarizing Cavanaugh's chapter, opening up a dialogue with Girard encourages a way of thinking about religion, signified in what Cavanaugh calls a 'constructivist' perspective, that can inspire a critical engagement with religion as a category of analysis that cannot readily be separated out as a causal factor. I am uncertain how compatible this task is with research on radicalisation as it currently stands.

Overall, the volume offers a thoughtful and critical engagement on the relationship between religion and violence through dialogue with the life works of René Girard. Girard's

work is good to think with and offers many fruitful insights, even if it has limitations. For a topic that so often operates with a narrow range of questions and shuts down inquiry and imagination, opening it up and creating an opportunity for pause and reflection makes the volume a worthwhile endeavour.

Ryan J. Williams

*Studies in Religion*

*School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*

*The University of Queensland*

*Brisbane Qld 4072*

*AUSTRALIA*

*Email: ryan.williams1@uq.edu.au*